Critical Family History

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### Acknowledging My Role: Critical Family History

It is easy for contemporary Canadians to think that the days of settler colonialism are long over and we bear no responsibility in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous nations in Canada, but this view ignores the fact that the public and private infrastructure that Canadians have built was built on stolen Indigenous land and that those of us whose ancestors settled or homesteaded in Canada were gifted land that was stolen by the Crown from Indigenous Peoples.

Sleeter in 2016 engaged in a critical family history project and provided a template that others may use. They found that, along with the rise of web applications and software designed for amateur genealogists to trace their family histories, there has been a trend for ‘white’ (I use this term acknowledging that ‘whiteness’ extends beyond phenotype) or dominant social groups to focus solely on exploring their own family history, while ignoring the greater social context in which their ancestors lived. Conversely, members of minority groups were more likely to connect their family histories to the history of systemic oppression their ancestors experienced.

This tendency can lead to a kind of erasure, where the family histories of the dominant group ignore or minimize the role that oppressive government policies have played in their ongoing success and material wealth. It is precisely this erasure of oppression that makes it difficult for many settlers to acknowledge their privilege and their ongoing role in the oppression of minority groups. Engaging in the process of a critical family history is an important first step for settler researchers to acknowledge their role in the research and to more fully understand the implications of a commitment to reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination.

Using online genealogy software to trace ancestral lineage is an accessible, though time-consuming, approach for amateur genealogists to learn about when and where their ancestors originated, and when and where they settled in what is now known as North America. Using this information, it is possible to use census data, land titles, and published wills to trace the transfer of land stolen from Indigenous nations and given to colonial settlers, often for a fraction of its monetary value, and always with no regard for its spiritual value or its role in the lives and identities of Indigenous Peoples. This data may also be aligned with known dates of the initiation of governmental policies that encouraged and enabled the seizure of land from Indigenous Nations. Further, by tracing land titles and archived wills, Sleeter was able to trace the transfer of wealth from specific Indigenous nations to her ancestors and ultimately to her personally.

In the fall of 2019, I engaged in a critical family history focusing on the emigration of my father’s grandfather who left Norway as a young man and eventually homesteaded in central Alberta. This presentation will explain the process of conducting this action research self study, what I learned about my family history, and how I have used open source technologies to share my findings and recommendations.